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Debating children's susceptibility to persuasion - where does fairness come in? A commentary on the Nairn and Fine versus Ambler debate

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Debating children's susceptibility to persuasion – where does fairness come in?

A commentary on the Nairn and Fine versus Ambler debate

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For those who have been following this debate, the detailed point-by-point contestation between Nairn and Fine (2008a, b) and Ambler (2008), together with the occasionally personal nature of the exchange, may have obfuscated as much as it has enlightened. But some important ground has been covered, advancing our thinking on the ethics of advertising to children. This is timely, for the regulation of advertising, especially on emerging online, mobile and gaming platforms, is likely to be at the forefront of the policy agenda in 2009.

Usefully, the debate has centred on a persistent muddle undermining discussion of whether and when it is fair to advertise to children. This conflates a philosophical question about ethics (is it fair to persuade those who are unaware of such efforts?) with an empirical question about influence (who is particularly susceptible to persuasive messages?). Several decades ago, one answer was hit upon for both questions, the neatness of this solution anchoring its place in the advertising literature canon. Children younger than 12 or so are, it is held, distinctively unaware of advertising's intent *and* particularly susceptible to its power. Inserting a 'because' between these claims, thereby positioning the former as the explanation of the latter, was a simple move that further compounded the muddle.

And so was born the canonical argument that, first (the literacy argument), until somewhere between 8 and 12 years old, children cannot grasp the persuasive intent of advertising; second (the influence argument), since they lack adequate cognitive defences (or advertising literacy), children (unlike adolescents and adults) are particularly susceptible to advertising; and third (the fairness argument), since they are both unduly vulnerable and unable to defend themselves, it is unfair to advertise to young children (see Kunkel, 2001), although, many suggest, insofar as their advertising literacy can be increased, advertising to children need not be restricted.

But there are difficulties with this account – hence Ambler's debate with Nairn and Fine. While both sides agree that more research, and even more self-regulation, is needed, they do not agree about the processes by which advertising persuades or the relevance of the fairness argument across the age range. I first consider these difficulties, for if it achieves nothing else, this debate may end the unthinking repetition of an outdated account.

Empirical support for the three central claims is equivocal (see Nairn and Fine, 2008a; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Wright et al, 2005). First, while the evidence for children's recognition of advertising is reasonably sound as regards television

advertising, little is known about children's recognition of or scepticism towards the present media environment (including viral marketing, user engagement strategies, brand advocacy, emotion marketing, behavioural targeting, social networking applications, spin-off merchandising, cross-media promotions, product placement, sponsorship, advergames, and more; see Calvert, 2008; Chester and Montgomery, 2007; Fielder et al, 2007; Moore and Rideout, 2007).

Second, there is little evidence that young children are more affected by advertising than adolescents (or, indeed, adults), even though the latter are more media-literate (e.g. Moore and Lutz, 2000; Lewis and Hill, 1998 – as reviewed in Nairn and Fine, 2008a, and Livingstone and Helsper, 2006). In short, the recognition of persuasive intent does not appear to confer immunity from persuasive effects, irrespective of age. One explanation is that both the nature of persuasive appeals and the processes of influence may differ for younger children versus adolescents and even adults – hence the point of invoking dual process models, as these offer a more satisfactory and nuanced account of the existing evidence, though as Ambler rightly notes, their predictions are untested.

Third, there is surprisingly little evidence to support the notion that if media literacy is high, or if it is increased, advertising effects are reduced (Kunkel et al, 2004). Those who (often with the best intentions) advocate media literacy interventions have yet to establish their case, and this matters especially insofar as media literacy is also being promoted as an argument against new media regulation.

Problems with the evidence base are hardly new. But now that the media environment has evolved from the familiar one shaped by mass market television to a highly diverse, fast-changing, multiplatform landscape, it is not just children who struggle to identify messages of persuasive intent, or to evaluate (or even locate) the source of messages. Indeed, although adults know that online, mobile and gaming platforms are commercial in nature, this does not mean they can detect when and how they are being targeted or by what messages, for adult awareness of persuasive intent may apply only at the most general level. Not only must adults acknowledge their own struggles with digital literacy, the obesity debate has further forced the widespread recognition that failing to mitigate the influence of certain commercial messages may spell not only personal but also public policy costs.

The canonical account also rests on flawed theory. It seems accepted by both Nairn and Fine and Ambler that Piaget's theory of cognitive development is no longer valid for, despite its support for the neat linkage of literacy and influence in consumer socialisation theory (John, 1999), contemporary developmental psychology has moved on. As Goswami (2008: 1-2) reported to the UK's Byron Review, contrary to Piaget's age-and-stage approach: 'it is now recognised that children think and reason in the *same* ways as adults [… but they] are less efficient reasoners than adults because they are more easily mislead in their logic by interfering variables such as contextual variables, and because they are worse at inhibiting irrelevant information'.

Hence Moses and Baldwin (2005: 197) adopt a 'theory of mind' approach which asks not, at what age do children understand advertising intent, but 'how flexibly they can deploy these concepts in real-world contexts, and the extent to which their subsequent behaviour is guided by these concepts'. This, some developmentalists argue, depends

on ‘executive function development’ ongoing through adolescence into early adulthood, while others stress the social, symbolic and material mediations underpinning social-cognitive development over the whole life-course, inspired by Vygotsy’s intersubjectivist theory. For Wright et al (2005; 231), only thus can we relate ‘children’s understanding of marketing to their emerging understandings about other persuasion and influence contexts of their everyday lives’. Similarly, Crook (2008) focuses attention on how the media reconfigure the norms of practice within which children experience themselves and the world (e.g. supporting peer-based communication or scaffolding learning through appropriately - or inappropriately - designed interfaces).

One consequence of relying on Piaget was to universalise ages (in years) as stages (of cognitive development). Coincidentally, this fitted the evidence obtained during the twentieth century dominance of mass television advertising, but it does not fit the diversity of the twenty-first century media environment. The theoretical shift to a more social analysis usefully permits recognition of the complex and variable relations between children and their social/mediated contexts. Today, as Nairn and Fine (2008a: 448) observe, no ‘magic age’ or ‘developmental milestone’ at which children can resist persuasion should be expected, both because there is no universal relation between understanding and age and because persuasion occurs, in one way or another, across the age range. Thus the key question becomes, who can resist which type of persuasion under what circumstances? This is a good empirical question for persuasion researchers, and it does not preclude policy makers deciding that, for legal/protectionist or rights-based reasons, or because research finds them particularly vulnerable, children – and, under certain circumstances, adolescents – represent a special case.

In effect, this is to allow for multiple forms of vulnerability. Importantly, vulnerability is shaped by not one but two factors – it depends not only on the individual’s cognitive/social resources but also on the (social or mediated) environment. If this latter is unfamiliar, difficult to understand, in some degree ‘illegible’ for particular or all individuals, it renders any or all of them ‘illiterate’ (Livingstone et al, 2008). Since the commercial messages embedded in new media environments are found by many to be ‘hard to read’, adults and children alike can be rendered vulnerable. Ambler (2008) scorns the claim he attributes to Nairn and Fine, namely that all implicit advertising is unfair. But while Nairn and Fine disavow having made such a claim, perhaps I will hazard some support for it (as is widely accepted for the already-regulated practices of subliminal advertising and product placement – Hackley et al, 2008).

In suggesting that it is unfair to advertise to anyone in ways that they cannot, for whatever reason, detect, I step out of the domain of empirical research into that of politics – a dangerous move perhaps, but one that lurks beneath this debate. Even if it would be too crude to regard Nairn and Fine as defending the interests of children and Ambler as defending the interests of advertisers, such fundamental differences of interest shape the wider debate, and it would be naïve to treat this as a purely intellectual discussion.

But where does all this leave the relation between evidence and policy? Crucially, it suggests that the influence argument should not be seen as a necessary consequence of

the literacy argument since people, including children, can be influenced irrespective of their literacy, albeit perhaps by a different persuasive process. Only once these are separated can the relevance of the fairness argument be discerned – for really there are two arguments here.

The first suggests it is unfair to persuade children if they cannot tell they are being persuaded. The second suggests it is unfair to persuade people if such persuasion is against their own interest (i.e. if the effect of the persuasion is harmful). It seems to me that Nairn and Fine support the former argument and, though Ambler ridicules it, his call for research and self-regulation of the new media environment also hints at support. I would agree. Positions on the second argument are less clear: for Ambler, it seems that advertising is generally in people's interest (as he says, it pays for good media content); for Nairn and Fine, it seems that, for those with sufficient resources (cognitive, social), persuasion will not occur against the individual's interests, but problems occur when such resources are lacking. Here, as I have argued elsewhere (Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, 2006), a risk-based explanation is required that contextualises advertising as one among multiple factors influencing children.

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